

SAGAS OF THE EARLY ELKS

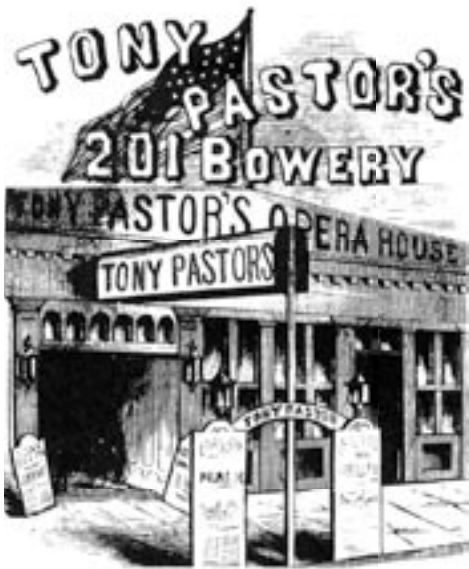
Most Elks know their order was originally a drinking club called the Jolly Corks, founded in New York in 1867 by the English comic singer Charles Vivian. Some Elks even know the names and occupations of the fifteen “original Jolly Corks.” But there was a common denominator for most of these performers that is less known today: Tony Pastor.



Tony Pastor, showman

The *History of the Order of Elks* reports that “just before the holidays--Charles Vivian [& fellow Corks] returning one afternoon from a funeral of a friend--Ted Quinn, of local concert hall fame--dropped into Tony Pastor's. There they found Billy Gray, Tony and 'Dody' Pastor, John Fielding and William Sheppard, who became interested in the story of the 'Jolly Corks,' and all of them strolled over from Pastor's to 'Sandy' Spencer's, where they found George F. McDonald and others.

After hearing the story of the funeral the 'Jolly Corks' had attended, McDonald suggested that the organization should become a 'protective and benevolent society.' During the next week or ten days McDonald broached the idea to a number of Jolly Corks ...” (WP 12).



That the Jolly Corks would go by Tony Pastor's Opera House on 201 Bowery is no surprise. In the winter of 1867 and spring of 1868, the period when the Elks were founded, many Corks were associated with Pastor's: William Carleton was singing his native Irish songs there, and G.W. Thompson began an engagement in *The Shipwrecked Sailor*.

The Black Crook, which scandalized New York with its “large number of female legs,” was parodied by Pastor's *The White Crook*, in which Corks Thomas G. Riggs, George F. McDonald, and William Sheppard played the respective roles of *Black Crook* starlets Rosina Paganini, Marie Bonfanti, and Betty Rigl. Apparently, the Early Elks weren't adverse to appearing on stage in a dress!

Even our founder, Charles Algernon Sidney Vivian, appeared at Pastor's on April 20th, 1868, along with *The Dry Goods Clerks of New York* and Pastor's “troupe of performing dogs and monkeys.” (OD 353-5)

Elk & Showman Tony Pastor The “Father of Vaudeville”

Pastor and his brothers, William and Fernando, were involved with the Elks almost from the beginning. They appear, respectively, on the Elks initial membership role as numbers 135, 318, and 8. Fernando, member # 8, was especially enthusiastic, but died of consumption in 1876 at thirty-three.

Tony Pastor brought his knack for organization to the Elks. As an early historian of the order relates, “Brother Pastor was ... the maker of the motion to create a Grand Lodge, which formed the beginning of the present Order of Elks.” (CE 327) His signature is featured prominently on the Grand Lodge Charter.



Pastor was born in New York City, and drawn to show business from an early age. At one point his father sent him to the countryside in an effort to curb his boyhood penchant for performance, but the field hands were so distracted with laughing at his impromptu antics that he was sent back. As he grew older, Tony Pastor performed for P.T. Barnum and was featured prominently at “the 444,” a concert saloon which was then managed by Robert Butler. This is the same man who later gave our founder, Charles Vivian, his U.S. premier at Robert Butler's American Theater.

Pastor first made a name for himself as a comic singer and performer at the 444. In particular, he was known for his pro-Union patriotism. He seems to have been the first stage performer to have ended his performances with a sing-along-version of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” a practice that became a personal trademark.

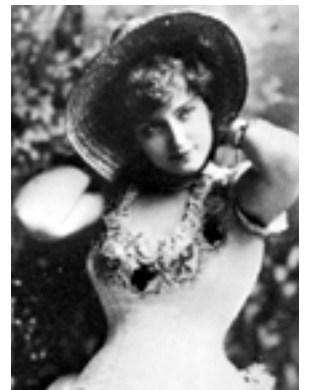
Pastor was pro-draft at a time when this was a dangerous stance, especially with the Irish immigrants who formed a significant portion of his audience. In 1863, New York City erupted into draft riots, lynchings, and street battles with police that did not subside until federal troops intervened. At least once when Pastor sang a pro-draft song, a cordon of bartenders had to struggle for several minutes to eject cat-calling, object-hurling members of the audience. (PZ 1-22)

Pastor is best remembered today for his ties to vaudeville. This historian's account is typical:

The most immediate roots of vaudeville ... were in the concert saloon, from which it drew its audience, structure, and performers. In virtually all accounts, the key figure in its development was 'the father of vaudeville,' Tony Pastor. ... In 1865, he opened Pastor's 201 Bowery Opera House, and he spent the next ten years successfully riding a fine line between retaining his concert saloon base and trying to expand his audience. (JC 132-3)

Pastor walked this line by attempting to bring more women into the audience, at first with special, family-friendly matinee performances, and then by making his evening shows more “chaste.” This emphasis on bringing in women, which could potentially double his audiences, accelerated when he moved his theater from the Bowery to Broadway in 1875. By 1885 had succeeded in creating what one newspaper noted was “the only vaudeville theatre in New York that is patronized by the ladies.” (PZ 85) This would change in the 1890s as vaudeville— thanks in no small part to Pastor's pioneering efforts—found its legs and began to flourish.

In addition to helping form the Grand Lodge, Pastor was an incorporator of the Actor's Fund, a charity organization for performers. He also helped many people launch their careers. In addition to a good many Corks and Elks, Pastor discovered and promoted 1890s siren Lillian Russell, and George M. Cohan, later celebrated in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.



Lillian Russell

Late in life Pastor became an avuncular figure: recognized and revered, but also eclipsed by the success of the very variety industry he pioneered. After his 1907 funeral, his remains were conveyed to the Brooklyn Lodge of the Elks,

where they lay in state until a special ceremony the next afternoon. The *Mirror* newspaper reported that “The spacious clubhouse of the Elks was crowded to suffocation and thousands of people stood in the street during the services.” 400 members of the

New York Elks Lodge walked several blocks as an escort during the funeral procession to Evergreens Cemetery, Brooklyn. (PZ 111)

— Warren Hedges, BPOE #944, 2004



Caricature of Pastor

References

CE: Charles Ellis. *An Authentic History of the BPOE* 1910. **OD:** George O'Dell. *Annals of the New York Stage* vol. 8, 1936. **JC:** Jim Cullen. *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the U.S.* 1996. **PZ:** Parker Zellers. *Tony Pastor, Dean of the Vaudeville Stage* 1971. **WP:** William Phillips, 1922, reprinted in James Nicholson, *History of the Order of Elks* 1992.